Chapter One

Finding the Low Gap

August 1773

Well, hello to you! My name is Jemima, Jemima Boone. I'm eleven years old. Well, I'm actually ten…but I'll be eleven on October 4th. My daddy is Daniel Boone. That's him standing over by that large chestnut tree talking to some of the men. Daddy's the one with the longrifle and the floppy full-brim felt hat. The one dressed in moccasins, buckskin leggings, a broadcloth shirt and buckskin vest.

Well, won't you listen to me. All those men have longrifles, are a wearing buckskins and floppy felt hats. Oh! Let me see…Daddy's the one with the striking blue eyes and the wide shoulders. He has the reddish, sandy hair that is plaited and clubbed in the back. You still not sure? A handsome man he is—there. Now you see him.

This spring he was coming back from a winter hunting trip in Kentucky with Mr. Benjamin Cutbirth when they run into Captain William Russell, a trader, landowner and captain of the militia. Captain Russell resides at Castle's Wood, in a valley on the headwaters of the Clinch River—the very spot we stand at right now. When Daddy told him of the rich lands across the mountains in the lower Cumberland and Ohio Valley, he was agreeable to organizing a group of settlers to go into Kentucky. Captain Russell, by virtue of his rank and position, will be the leader and my daddy, by virtue of having already been to Kentucky, will be the guide.

When Daddy got back to our farm on the Yadkin River, he found that Mother had just bore my baby brother, Jesse Bryan. Mother is as tough as they come, but you can guess she wasn't all that excited about leaving her family, the Bryans, and traveling into the wilderness with a new baby. After a bit, Daddy talked her into selling the farm, packing up everything and heading for Kentucky. Daddy's a talker. Some say he takes after me.

We are gathered here at Castle's Wood a getting ready to travel down through Virginia to the low gap in the Cumberland Mountains. We'll find Kentucky somewhere on the other side. Daddy has had this notion of settling in Kentucky for a long time.

Our party arrived on this spot in central Virginia in August of 1773. It's now September 25 and our family and several other families are preparing for a long and dangerous trip into Kentucky.

Captain Russell, the gentleman from Castle's Wood, will catch up with us in Powell's Valley well before we go through the low gap in the Cumberland Mountains.

Some of the Bryan men, my uncle Squire Boone and his family, my cousin Elizabeth and her husband Mr. Benjamin Cutbirth, and some of the other neighbors will also be meeting us in Powell's Valley.

"Jemima," you ask, "why is that low gap so important and why wait for all those other folks? Why not just get on down the road?" Why, why, why—you got more y's than a back pocket full of slingshots. Well, I'll tell you why! When you see those mountains for yourself, you will know why. You can't just walk over one of these mountains and that's why a gap or a low place in the mountain range is so important. It's also important to have lots of people in the group you are traveling with. The more people we travel with, the safer it will be for everyone. Especially if they have flintlock rifles and know how to use them.

Well, well, bless me. You are probably wondering why it is so dangerous traveling in these parts and how I know about the Cumberland Gap and Kentucky. First off, the wilderness is a very dangerous place because of all the Indian mischief going on. You see the Indians sorta feel Kentucky is their hunting grounds and don't like it when the longhunters come in and kill animals just to get their skins—the animals they depend on for food. They also don't like the idea of the settlers cutting down trees and building farms.

Everyone pulls the quilt over on their side of the bed and that's the straight of it. Daddy allowed the Indians don't actually feel they own land; they just feel they are the only ones who should be hunting on it. The great tribes north of the Ohio River are the Illinois, Kickapoo, Algonquins, Fox, Ottawa, Shawnee, Chippewa, Delaware, Wyandot and the Mingo. Some include the Miami in that group, but I'm not so sure they are just all the Indian tribes that live along the Miami River. The Cherokee live south of Kentucky in the mountains. They have fought each other off and on for thousands of years over who should hunt in Kentucky and are not about to let a bunch of puny Europeans come in and take it from them.

Well, my dad's not puny and neither are any of the other men going with us to Kentucky. We feel we have a right to hunt and settle Kentucky just as much as the Indians.

Daddy thinks of himself as a common man, but he's anything but common. He's a bit of a romantic. He's compact and muscular and stands about…let me see, this tall. Well, there I go. You can't see my hand over my head, now can you? So, I'm a figuring in my head that I'd be

about this much tall and he's about this much more, so I'd say he's about five feet and some eight to ten inches tall. If you talk to him, listen carefully. His voice is soft like most who spend time in the wilderness, *where survival depends on quiet conversations.*

Daddy's favorite books are the Bible and Gulliver's Travels. His Quaker upbringing and the teaching he received from his older brother's wife, Sarah, left him with fair to midlin' reading and writing skills for a frontiersman. Growing up Quaker taught Daddy to see the good, the inner light in all humans, and the importance of fair dealing with people, including the Indians. He says Indians are also God's children.

Like my Daddy, I have been brought up to see the good in everyone, and truthfully, I do. I smile with one eye and keep a close watch with the other.

Daddy is known for his knowledge of the Indians and the wilderness. When he has been to a place people feel it's safe to travel there. They also feel new opportunity is connected with the places he goes. Daddy doesn't know much about all of that. He just loves to hunt, trap and tan hides. Well, would you listen to me—nobody likes to tan hides. Going into the wilderness is usually more than a business trip for him. It's an opportunity to explore and discover whatever and whoever is out there. He's not always pleased to meet the whoever, but the Indians come with the wilderness, as does the danger. The danger, I've heard him say, makes the curiosity and wonder of it all the more exciting.

He doesn't need a compass when he travels in the woods. He uses the sun and the stars the way the Indians do. The mountain ranges, the river and creeks are his maps. Once he sees a piece of ground, he never forgets it.

Daddy started dreaming about hunting in Kentucky as far back as 1755. When he worked as a teamster for General Braddock in the French and Indian War, he met a man there named Mr. John Findley.

Mr. Findley was an Irish peddler. He had traveled down the Ohio River into Kentucky. There he had hunted, trapped and traded with the Indians.

Daddy told me he and a Mr. Nathaniel Gist went on a hunting trip in the Bushy Mountains west of Yadkin in 1760. While there they met a Negro slave named Burrell who told them about Kentucky. He told stories about the rich hunting grounds and some of the trails that went north through low gaps in the mountains.

In 1765, near the end of summer Daddy and some men went on a trip to Florida. Daddy told Mother he would be home by dinner on Christmas day, and sure enough he was. I won't say any more about that trip since Mother wasn't about to move to Florida.

In 1767 Daddy talked his brother, Uncle Squire, and a Mr. William Hill into going with him across the mountains along the Big Sandy River. He wanted to hunt and explore for the low gap. They left in the fall. The terrain was so hilly and thick with laurel it was difficult and slow going. When winter set in they were ketched in a sudden snow storm. They wintered there, making camp near a salt lick where they hunted their food. That's where Daddy saw his first buffalo, and like most frontiersmen, developed a taste for its hump and tongue.

While on the trip Daddy and Mr. Hill became fast friends. I guess long winter days in a hunting camp involves lots of idle chatter. They agreed to keep in touch and whoever had the misfortune of dying first would come back and tell the other about how things were on the other side. Just what things I'm not sure. Maybe how the hunting was? Did the buffalo tongue taste as good? Did you have to take a bath once a month, or ever have to take one at all? I suspect them to be questions that weigh heavy on a frontiersman's mind.

Anyway, Mr. Hill must have got something else weighing on his mind as Daddy never heard anything from him after that. Nor did he contact Daddy from the hereafter, or at least Daddy didn't say anything to me about it.

When spring broke, they pushed on but became discouraged with the mountains and rugged terrain. They soon returned home to the Yadkin, the trip a failure. As I said finding the low gap through the mountains was essential, especially if you were taking considerable supplies and family in.

You'd think that would be the end of it, but it only proved where the gap wasn't. Daddy was never one to let a hard knot slow down his whittlin' and as it was, luck was on his side. Who do you think showed up at our Yadkin farm in the spring of 1769? Well, Mr. John Findley, of course. He pulled up a chair and stayed a while, the whole time he and Daddy a talking about Kentucky. Daddy told him how he had tried to reach Kentucky by way of the Big Sandy and had failed. Mr. Findley said the Indians he knew spoke of a low gap in the mountains the buffalo used to enter into Kentucky from Virginia. The buffalo trace went all the way up to the Ohio River. The buffalo traces were the trails used by Indian warriors to travel into their hunting

grounds from the north and from the south. They also used them to raid each other's villages and hunting camps.

Sometimes at night Mother would let us older children, James, Israel, Susannah and me—well, I'm older too! She'd let us sit up late and listen to Mr. Findley tell wonderful stories about trading with the Indians in Kentucky. Mr. Findley, he would tell about his trips down the great Ohio River to the mouth of the Kentucky River. He told us of an Indian trading village that sat somewhere along the Kentucky River, about ten miles back off from the river itself. He called it, Es-kip-pa-ki-thi-ki. The name flowed off his tongue like poetry. We children tried hard to say it, but it always seemed to come out of our mouths in a strange unnatural way. Daddy would slap his knee and have a good belly laugh.

Mr. Findley said he was making a good living trading with the Indians at Eskippakithiki. The Indians would trade their pelts for guns, knives, tomahawks, ammunition, beads, blankets, and other trade goods. He said he was a doing fine when one day the Indians up and turned on him. Just like that—one day they were his trading partners, the next day they took all his pelts and goods and chased him off. He figured the British had convinced the Indians to turn against him.

Mr. Findley's description of the land in Kentucky left us all dreaming in our slumber of living there. Eskippakithiki was surrounded by great meadows and savannas with large groves of hickory, oaks and sugar maples. There were large herds of grazing buffalo, deer and elk. Salt springs were scattered here and there, where the animals came to lick the salty dirt. The land was covered with wide rivers and streams where endless beaver, otter, mink and muskrat swam. There were black bear too numerous to count, and panthers, fox and raccoons. James, he set his eye on getting one of those panthers, and I suspect he will.

Daddy's eyes would light up with excitement as Mr. Findley would tell his stories. He said there was a better way through the mountains than the Big Sandy route Daddy had tried the year before. Mr. Findley reasoned that there must be a pass or gap, since the Cherokee were constantly making war against the northern Indians.

Daddy and Mr. Findley talked it over and made an agreement to raise a group of men, find the warrior path and hunt in Kentucky. They convinced my Uncle John Stewart into going along with them. They also invited three neighbor men; Mr. James Mooney, Mr. Joseph Holder and Mr. William Cooley. The extra men would act as camp keepers, preparing and packing the skins.

The men finished their spring planting and prepared to go. They packed shot, powder, flints, kettles, traps and blankets on near fifteen horses or so. The weather had turned bad, but they headed out anyway, traveling west crossing the Holston, Clinch, and Powell rivers. They eventually came upon a low gap in the mountains. There were visible signs of animal and Indian warrior travel through the gap. They were all much encouraged as they came out on the other side.

Daddy said they traveled along the buffalo trace, crossing rivers and camping on the headwaters of a creek. When you travel in uncharted mountains you can't always take the most direct path. The route was hilly with lots of bushes that followed stream beds and shaded valleys. The men traveled the trail, following the path the buffalo made as it migrated toward the flatlands. One day while the others rested Daddy clum the ridge above the camp. From that high spot he found a large tree and went up it. Leaving his rifle cradled in a lower branch, well off the ground, he clum to the highest point in the tree that would bear his weight. He parted the limbs and looked to the north at valleys and rolling hills.

He returned to camp with the news. They figured they might be nearing Mr. Findley's Promised Land. They crossed a ridge and entered a valley. As they explored, they went around hills when they could and followed streams, sticking to the Indian path. A stream turned into a creek that eventually emptied into the Kentucky River at a Shawnee camp called Ah-wah-nee or "grassy place." Back up the valley from there they made their first hunting camp and called it Station Camp, which gave name to the creek, Station Camp Creek. The main camp was on the crest of a hill above the creek bottom. From there the men went out and established small camps they would do their hunting from as the weather grew cooler.

The camp was bordered by the Kentucky River on the northeast and hills all around. The hills on the west side of the valley started a gentle incline as you got closer to them. The ones on the east side of the valley were steep along the Kentucky River. A range of hills and valleys were to the south. The surrounding valley west of the river was grassy.

Daddy said the creek ran clean and clear, the banks steeper as you drew near the Kentucky River. The area was rich with bear, deer, elk, and buffalo. Mr. Findley immediately set out to find Eskippakithiki, the Shawnee trading village near the Kentucky River. He got back on the Indian path, which followed the west bank of Station Camp Creek and crossed the Kentucky River. He

followed the river as it flowed, turned off and eventually found Eskippakithiki. The village had been deserted and the huts burned. He returned after ten days with the news of the find.

In June Daddy and Uncle John accompanied Mr. Findley to Eskippakithiki. From the village the men could see they were surrounded by vast plains—an area of large meadows of waist high grasses of white clover, buffalo grass, reed pines and blue grass. Daddy said that the grass grew thick and tall even under the tall ash, cherry and locust trees. The area they had traveled would soon be called, the Kentucky levels. They were much encouraged to see the proof of Mr. Findley's tales of Kentucky.

Things were fine, until December when Daddy and Uncle John were surprised by a Shawnee hunting party lead by an Indian named Captain Will. The Indians forced them to take them to Station Camp. When they got there the rest of the men were out hunting. The Indians took all the pelts and their horses and told them to go home and not come back. When the other men returned to the camp they decided to return to the Yadkin.

Not Daddy. He and Uncle John trailed the Indians and tried unsuccessfully to get their horses back. When they failed, they turned around and ketched up with Mr. Findley and the other men on the Rockcastle River. They were overjoyed to find Uncle Squire and a Mr. Alexander Neeley there with new supplies and additional horses, as well as traps and ammunition.

Daddy, Uncle Squire, Mr. Neeley and Uncle John, returned to the Kentucky River, but made their camp well away from the buffalo trace as it was too heavily traveled by Indian warriors. They chose a place on down the river on its north bank, where another river emptied into the Kentucky River. There they hunted through the winter.

A sad turn of events occurred in January or early February when Uncle John disappeared. He and Daddy had been hunting together when they split up—Daddy stayed on the north side of the Kentucky River and Uncle John crossed to the south bank. The plan was to meet up later at the base camp, but Uncle John never showed up. The water on the Kentucky was up from heavy rains and when Daddy was finally able to cross the river, he found the remains of a recent camp fire. He also found Uncle John's initials freshly carved on a tree. He searched, but nothing else was found.

Uncle John was married to Daddy's youngest sister, Hannah. They had four children, my dear cousins. Daddy said he never had a brother he thought more of than John Stewart. He was

faithful and a good hunting companion. Daddy felt that some unusual misfortune had caused him to disappear, figuring he had been killed or had sickened and died in the wilderness.

After Uncle John disappeared Mr. Neeley left to go home. Daddy and Uncle Squire stayed and hunted and trapped through the winter. In May of 1770 Uncle Squire took a load of furs, mostly beaver, back to Virginia. Daddy stayed in Kentucky and explored, often sleeping in canebrakes to avoid Indians. It was during this time that he traveled up what would be known as the Green River Valley. He discovered several large salt licks by following the buffalo traces. He saw thousands of buffalo at the licks. He traveled north to the Ohio River and followed its southern bank down to the great falls in the river. His exploring helped him to know more about Kentucky than any white man alive.

In July Uncle Squire returned and they hunted together until March of 1771. They returned to Virginia with their horses' heavy with pelts, only to be robbed again by a band of Indians in Powell's Valley. Like I said earlier, Daddy felt he had a God given right to hunt and trap the pelts. The Indians, of course, figured they owned all of it to begin with, so Daddy did the work and the Indians benefited. It raises my hackles when I think on it, but that's the way of it in the wilderness.